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Sense of Duty, Service to Corps Steers Chow to Iraq

“This isn’t about money. This is about selfless service and duty”

By Joseph Bonfiglio, Chief, HED Public Affairs

(HONOLULU – NR 021-05) When Derek Chow deployed to Iraq in early 2005 he knew it would be a tough assignment, but he believed it was his duty as a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers employee to make a difference.

“I believed that my contribution to helping the people of Iraq attain a more stable lifestyle and get on their feet faster would result in our troops returning home sooner rather than later,” said Chow, a project manager with the Honolulu District’s Civil and Public Works Branch.

Chow served as Resident Engineer for the Corps’ Danger Resident Office, located on Forward Operating Base Danger in Tikrit, Iraq, from March to July 2005.

The base, part of the Corps’ Gulf Region North (Gulf Region Division), occupied one of Saddam Hussein’s former palace areas.

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2-2-2 CHOW IRAQ

“Our office managed and oversaw \$50 million worth of Iraqi reconstruction projects including: school repairs, railroad station and fire station rehabilitation, construction of healthcare centers, construction of roads, construction / installation of water compact units and construction of electrical distribution networks,” Chow said.

Chow’s said his greatest accomplishment was training Iraqi engineers who worked for the Resident Office.

“The Iraqi engineers were eager to learn a better way of managing construction in order to improve their construction quality and accountability. When we introduced Corps of Engineer standard quality management systems, we made dramatic improvements in project execution,” Chow said.

Chow added that the work was demanding.

“We worked seven days a week – making it difficult to remember what day it was exactly - days that were long and at times intense. Besides construction management skills, one also has to have great communication and people skills,” Chow said.

“Fortunately the food and the living quarters were much better than I expected. There is a good gym.”

Chow recalled that the best part of the deployment was the camaraderie among the office staff. People pulled together and supported the mission and each other.

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3-3-3 CHOW IRAQ

Although mortars, rockets and Improvised Explosive Devices were commonplace and gunfire was heard and seen almost everyday (off base), Chow felt the military kept everyone safe.

“Outside the gate, the dangers increased, but I felt the situation was sufficiently mitigated by the security measures we practiced,” Chow said.

“Though there are frequent explosions and gunfire, the dangers aren’t as bad as what the media portrays. Once, however, I was on a convoy with the military to meet with the Iraqi Deputy Minister of Electricity and to inspect construction on a Primary Healthcare Center in the town of Bayji when our convoy was hit with a suicide car bomb,” Chow said.

“The suicide vehicle hit an armored HUMVEE my coworker was in, but no one sustained serious injury. I accompanied our military escort on house searches and helped provide security for the soldiers questioning people in the town on the whereabouts of the person detonating the suicide car bomb. We eventually flushed out the insurgent detonator,” Chow said.

When asked if he would recommend a deployment to other Corps employees, Chow answered, “yes, I strongly recommend serving the Corps and our nation in Iraq or Afghanistan. I believe that as an USACE employee, it’s our duty to serve the Army in peace time and in war. And this isn’t about money. This is about selfless service and duty.”

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4-4-4 CHOW IRAQ

“It’s tough to do, but I think stateside commanders will end up having to direct good people to serve. The hardest part of the deployment was not for me, the employee, but for my family at home who supported me while I was in Iraq. Fortunately I was in regular contact with my family through e-mail and I called once a week. My family and friends looked out for each other,” Chow said.

“It’s a worthwhile experience, filled with both good and bad. People who are interested should work closely with Human Resources and the Emergency Management Division on finding a good match for their deployment. Do not leave it to chance,” Chow said.

“Iraq isn’t a place to learn a new job or to train. But it is a place where you can take hold of responsibilities and authority and really make a significant difference. The security situation is nowhere near as bad as that portrayed by the media,” he said.

“There are dangers, but the military and the Corps mitigate them. In coming home, I feel a sense of pride that the USA is a free country, that we have opportunities to improve ourselves and that we reach out to assist the rest of the world. I felt the pride of the Army and appreciated all the Army did in keeping peace and security in the region.”

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